"Tell me about a time you were bad."

by
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As a Christian trying to be a good father at the end of the 20th century, I am influenced by a culture which stresses that I must do everything possible to enhance my children's self-esteem, and nothing to harm that self-esteem. I feel this deeply. As a social scientist I am aware that many psychologists believe that low self-esteem lies at the root of many or even most psychological problems and that many blame the Christian doctrine of sin for this low self-esteem. As one prominent psychologist writes, ". . . the concept of sin is the direct and indirect cause of virtually all neurotic disturbances." And of course it is in childhood, from parents, that one learns and is damaged by such a concept. So our culture tells us, "Do not tell your children that they are sinners. There are no bad children, only children who think badly of themselves."

But the Bible does not agree with our culture. It tells me that one of the most important things we need to know about ourselves is that we are sinners in need of grace. Because I believe the Bible, I want my children to have a concept of self which includes the notion of self as sinner. Such an understanding is essential for an appreciation of what God has done for us in Christ and of how we must relate to God both in initial salvation and in the sanctification process. As a Christian parent I explicitly attempt to guide my children's developing concept of themselves. I tell them they are made in the very image of God. I encourage and praise them in their budding efforts at mastery of various skills and at the love they frequently show for each other. So far, so good. But I also teach them to think of themselves as sinners. And this, our culture says, I must not do--lest I cause great damage.

As I've struggled through these issues I've been struck by the thought that there is no other area where I directly influence others in terms of their experience of guilt and grace more than in my role as parent. I've concluded that there are roughly three possible patterns of how parents influence children in the area of guilt and grace: a.) Parents can teach a view of self which denies sin and thus results in distorted perceptions of the self. This is destructive of interpersonal relationships, mental health and spiritual well-being. b.) Parents can teach about sin and guilt but without doing so in the context of love and grace, which is terribly destructive of mental health. c.) Or finally, parents can present a biblical view of self as sinner whose guilt finds release in love and grace--the only approach with potential for producing full mental and spiritual health.

As I've reflected on these issues in the context of interaction with my children, my son Paul's response to discipline has long intrigued me. I've felt that it held clues for me, if I could only understand it. And so I take this opportunity to explore a particular incident and attempt to get some principles from it on how to appropriately teach sin, guilt, and grace to our children.

Paul, my five year old, was having a terrible day. And little Shelly seemed to be bearing the brunt of his ill temper. Three times her crying demanded attention. Not sure exactly what had happened, I nonetheless told Paul to be nice to his sister and not hurt her. But after the third occasion, I stopped just outside the door and peered unobstrusively back at Paul, who hesitated just long enough to be sure I was gone, and then reached over and punched Shelly vigorously. Five seconds later we were marching to his bedroom for a spanking. As he lay sobbing on the far side of the bed I lay down beside him. Unsure what to say, I finally asked, "Paul, have I ever told you about when I was little and my dad had to spank me?" Between sobs emerged a slightly interested, "no."

"Paul, when I was five I lived in an Indian village in Bolivia where my parents were missionaries. The Indians used palm leaf baskets and threw them in a dump near their big house. One day I put a bunch of them in a pile, got a piece of firewood from the cookfire, and started them on fire." Paul, sobs over, was now propped up on one elbow listening with interest. I continued, "It was fun! But the fire was right next to the Indians' house, and someone ran to tell my dad. He came and told me that I had nearly burned their house down, and that I should never ever build a fire again!

But I did. A few days later I built an even bigger fire, with flames higher than this ceiling. But someone told my dad. He took me to our outhouse for a spanking. I cried and said I was sorry and would never do it again. So he didn't spank me. And I built the fire again, bigger than ever, and right next to the Indian's house, with the flames burning close to its roof. When my dad came I cried and said I was sorry, but that time my dad spanked me. Hard!"

Paul was now sitting cross-legged, eyes wide in amazement at the incorrigibility of that other five year old--now his dad. "But, but, but why?" he asked. "Why did you keep building the fire?" "I don't know, Paul. I just don't know. Sometimes you know something's wrong, but you just want to do it anyway. Have you ever felt that way?" Paul nodded a slightly rueful assent. "You know, the Bible says we're all like that. Even when we're big. I still sometimes do and think bad things and have to tell God I'm sorry. But isn't it great that God still loves us, that because Jesus died to pay for our sins, God forgives us." Paul flopped back down, next to me now, head on my shoulder as we spent another half hour alternately discussing the details of my transgressions, why God gives us parents, and how even when we are big with no parents telling us what to do we still need to love and obey God and do what's right. Paul had a wonderful rest of the day.

Two months later Paul received another spanking. Before I could leave the room, Paul said, between sobs, "Dad, could you tell me about a time you were bad." So I lay next to him as he snuggled close and told about the time I took a shovel and demolished some adobes my friends had spent three days making, planning to build a fort. I talked about my envy, and how ashamed I later felt. Paul's tears evaporated. Our talk went long. He too struggled with envy.

Over the next two or three years I spanked Paul perhaps half a dozen times. Each time Paul called me before I could leave the room. His request was always the same. "Dad, could you tell me about a time when you were bad." And so we talked about theft (my own), about lying, about disobedience, about being mean and teasing those who are handicapped. We discussed shame, guilt, confession, conscience. I told personal stories from my own life, and related them to Biblical understandings of who we are and of who God is. We talked about sin and how wonderful it is that God

forgives us and gives us the power to change into new persons. Invariably, our talk over, Paul would go cheerfully on to have a greatly improved rest of the day - seemingly morally rejuvenated by it all.

But what was it about these talks that struck such a chord with my son? First, of course, is the fact that I was telling stories. "Tell me about a time that you were bad," is a request for a story--a particular kind of story, one which addresses a life situation comparable to the one Paul had just faced. The beauty of a story is that it takes you out of yourself. You are able to vicariously experience what the story's actor experiences. But since it is a story about someone else and not your own situation, you are able to have sufficient distance to appreciate the message of the story.

Had the prophet Nathan spoken directly to David of his sin, David's personal involvement and shameful culpability might have made it difficult for him to hear the message. But upon hearing a story about another situation of wrongdoing David was caught up vicariously in the drama of the story and responded morally to it. Then he was ready for the bridge to his own life.

Had I attempted to help Paul dissect his own transgression it would have been too painful and personal for him. But by shifting the focus to a story of my own transgression Paul was allowed to focus on a situation other than his own present one, while nonetheless being helped to think through themes which were directly parallel to and relevant to his own situation. Stories are powerful tools for addressing issues of sin, guilt and grace and are perhaps not sufficiently used by Christian parents. Children are bombarded with stories on TV and in books which develop themes and self-understandings directly contradictory to biblical ones. We must make sure our children also hear stories which exemplify biblical understandings--including stories from our own lives. We must become story tellers of sin and grace.

A second point is that Paul's interest was aroused when I talked of my sin, not of his. Each time he asked me to speak of my "badness." Just as it is painfully difficult to stare directly into the burning sun, so it is painfully difficult to face one's own moral failure directly. It is particularly difficult when in the presence of another who is, as it were, asking to look with you at your shameful failure. When this other person is a parent who represents law and justice, who, as it were, represents the Good as over against your own Evil, the painful shame of facing one's own sin may be more than one can bear.

But when your parent lies next to you and speaks, not of your sin and guilt, but of their own, two things happen. First, one ceases to experience one's self as uniquely evil. One discovers oneself to be part of a community of sinners. The loneliness and isolation felt due to shame over one's moral failure disappears when another steps down next to you and acknowledges their own shameful failure. Paul learned that he differed from dad merely in his stage of life and that dad too struggled with sin. Paul snuggled close. Together we explored the meanings of our moral failures. Second, shame itself dissipates and is transformed. It ceases to be isolating, narcissistic, unbearable, emotionally destructive. What shame is left is a shared shame, constructive, pointing us to our shared need for God and his grace and power.

A third dimension of Paul's interest in our discussions involved his desire for understanding. "But, but, but why?" Paul asked concerning my continued perverse disobedience. Our conversations went long because of his many questions revealing a deep desire for understanding. From our conversations it seems clear to me that Paul felt a need to understand himself in terms of the old Pauline question of why it is that we act differently from how we know we should act. I never fully answered the "why?" question, but I did give a name to the problem. I pinpointed the mysterious problem as that of sin. And by simply naming the problem as that of sin, I also suggested something of its nature and the nature of the solution needed. How does one deal with sins committed? We talked (in the context of specific stories from my own life) of guilt, conscience, deserved punishment, but also of repentance, remorse, confession, restitution, salvation. We spoke of the cross and of God's final dealing with sin in Christ. Above all we spoke of guilt in the context of grace and forgiveness. How does one deal with present temptation? We spoke of resisting temptation and of God's help in doing so and in becoming morally changed. There is hope for growth and change.

Not only did Paul seem thoroughly to enjoy these talks, but he consistently returned to life clearly rising to the challenge of endeavoring to act in love and virtue. Immediately after our talks I saw Paul give scrupulous attention to issues of honesty and take joy in being kind, thoughtful, generous and patient. Rather than foster in Paul a secular self-esteem which denied sin, I had pushed for a biblically accurate self-image which acknowledged sin but which found resolution to sin in love and grace. Paul's subsequent cheerful pursuit of "the Good" suggests he was not harmed by such an approach. I am no perfect parent. Paul is no perfect child. But in this specific situation lie clues suggestive of the lessons I've mentioned here.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned that many psychologists believe that children who are taught by Christian parents that they are sinners end up with greater emotional problems. In fact a number of psychologists have conducted research attempting to prove that a sense of self as sinner does lead to a lack of mental health. Some studies seemed to support the thesis. Others did not. The results seemed contradictory. But finally some psychologists began to point out that there may be different kinds of Christians. They distinguished between those with "extrinsic religiosity" and those with "intrinsic religiosity." The former were cultural Christians. They attended church, learned about a just God and about good and evil. But they did not stress personal relationship with God. They did not stress personal salvation and forgiveness of sin.

The second group believed in God as just, but also as loving and forgiving, as a God of grace. They stressed personal relationship with this God of love, forgiveness and grace. The earlier studies had linked both groups together. But when studies were done which distinguished the two, the first group (which knew guilt but not grace) showed clear patterns of greater than average mental/emotional problems. But the second group, which also thought of themselves as sinners, but who believed their sin was forgiven by a gracious loving God, showed extremely high levels of mental health.

As Christians we must not be intimidated by our culture into abandoning the ancient biblical language and understanding of ourselves as sinners in need of grace. But the way in which we use the language of sin must not be oriented towards guilt alone, but towards grace and life. Guilt by itself is death. But guilt linked to grace gives life.